

## **The Charleston Debate of 1858**

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Chaotic applause and wild cheering greeted Lincoln and Douglas when 12,000 to 15,000 people gathered in Charleston, Illinois to hear them speak. This was their fourth public debate. While Lincoln advocated equality for all and wanted to abolish slavery, Douglas championed the doctrine of popular sovereignty and argued that each state should determine whether or not it would permit slaves within its jurisdiction. At stake was a seat in the U.S. Senate.

Prior to this debate, the country had become deeply divided over whether or not slavery should exist in new states; most of the South championed slavery while most of the North wanted to abolish it. Both Lincoln and Douglas hoped to clarify what the founding fathers had in mind when they wrote the Constitution. Lincoln and Douglas, however, interpreted history differently.

The audience at Charleston reflected the larger division within the country over slavery. Those from southern Illinois generally shared southern values and supported slavery. Republicans from northern Illinois believed that a combination of free and slave states would divide the Union irreparably. Division between the two groups was so keen that each side even competed to have the best music, flags, and parade at the Charleston debate.

H. P. H. Bromwell opened the debate by introducing Lincoln, and O.B. Ficklin introduced Douglas. Lincoln and Douglas were as different in character, mentality, and disposition as they were in physique. Lincoln was tall and awkward, while Douglas was

short and graceful. Douglas came across as a civilized man of the world while Lincoln was the rail splitter who went to the front door in his bare feet to receive visitors. Douglas's gestures were refined; Lincoln's were ungainly. Douglas was devoid of humor; Lincoln was a fine storyteller. Douglas seldom used a simile; Lincoln constantly argued with analogy and illustration. Douglas spoke with the "impetuous rush of a whirlwind," according to a specialist in public speaking. Lincoln was also quieter, deeper, and more careful.

The historical context of the Charleston debate was significant. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had become unconstitutional, abolishing the rule that new states north of latitude 36° 30' were to exclude slavery with the exception of Missouri. In addition, the Dred Scott decision in the Supreme Court denied African Americans the rights of citizens.

Both Lincoln and Douglas wanted to win the hearts and minds of the Charleston audience. At the beginning of the debate, Lincoln claimed he did not support racial equality. This controversial statement had been prompted by Douglas' earlier accusations that Lincoln wanted to give African Americans equal rights. Lincoln proceeded to charge Douglas with conspiracy and suggested that he, Lincoln, actually held the moral high ground. In return, Douglas said Lincoln and Lyman Trumbull had divided the country and had attacked his character as well. Douglas then called Lincoln an "abolitionist" and accused him of not voting for supplies to American soldiers during the Mexican War. In his rejoinder, Lincoln brought O. B. Ficklin to the lectern so that Ficklin could confirm that Lincoln had indeed voted to send supplies to American troops. Lincoln then

explained Senator Trumbull's charge against Douglas and asked Douglas to stick strictly to relevant political issues.

Newspapers of the day presented detailed accounts of the debate. According to Republican reports, Lincoln virtually destroyed the "Little Giant" every time he spoke. According to Democratic papers, Lincoln had been crushed under Douglas' onslaught. Regardless of bias, press coverage popularized the debates, most giving Lincoln the advantage. Although Lincoln would eventually lose the Senate race to Douglas, the debates earned him the visibility he needed to win the presidential election two years later. [From Paul M. Angle and Earl S. Miers, *The Living Lincoln*; Dale Carnegie, *Public Speaking for Success*; Edward Finch, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*. Freeport, Illinois: Lincoln-Douglas Society, 2000 <<http://www.lincoln-douglas.org>> (Oct. 3, 2007); H. H. Houghton, *The Charleston Debate*. Galena, IL: Weekly North-Western Gazette: Tuesday, Sept. 28, 1858. <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.2330:1.lincoln>> (Oct. 1, 2007); Prairie Beacon News, *Lincoln and Douglas at Charleston*. Paris, IL: Prairie Beacon News, Sept. 24, 1858, <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.2004:1.lincoln>> (Oct. 1, 2007); and J. G. Randall, *Lincoln the President*; Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln*.]